

## Our Branch's Beginnings

We started at the Kimball Hall building on the southwest corner of Wabash Ave. and Jackson Blvd. downtown. This building still stands and houses one of DePaul University's downtown units. On May 24, 1905, Professor George A. Vinton of the John Marshall Law School and John S. Zimmerman, Treasurer of the People's Gas Light and Coke Co., gathered with a group of thirty Dickens enthusiasts and held the first ever meeting of the Chicago Dickens Fellowship in Kimball Hall. Quoting from the July 1905 Dickensian, we read, "Mr. Vinton, to whom the branch owes its existence, is well known as a Dickens lecturer and reciter, and impersonator of the great novelist's characters. He writes: 'I am delighted to come in touch with Dickens lovers, as I have been one all my life, and heard the great master read. I met his agent, Mr. Dolly, in 1867, in Boston... We have thirty members now, and will have a hundred shortly... I have had three applications from the county towns for information how to form branches – rules, dues, etc... Our branch will be a great success, and will be heard of in charitable work, when we get fairly on our legs... We extend the "right hand of Fellowship" to all Dickens lovers, and hope to merit your goodwill by our works, not words.'"

The August 1905 Dickensian notes that another meeting held "an interesting discussion on *Oliver Twist*, which became so animated it had to be postponed to the following meeting, which took place at Miss Sprigg's house."

We moved the initial 1906 meetings to the Grand Pacific Hotel located at the northwest corner of Clark St. and Jackson Blvd. The hotel was demolished in 1921 and that corner now holds the former Continental Illinois Bank building. Quoting from *Streetwise Chicago* by Don Hayner and Tom McNamee, we read "...the Grand Pacific... became the unofficial western headquarters for the Republican Party. Here ... such as Abe Lincoln, U.S. Grant, and Stephen A. Douglas, jotted their names in the hotel registry."

The Chicago Historical Society sent us these notes of The Dickens Club of Chicago –

"The regular semi-monthly meeting of the Dickens Club will be held in the Breakfast Room of the Grand Pacific Hotel on Thursday, June 21, at 8 o'clock P.M. The closing of the Great Expectations series will occupy the evening."

"The first fall meeting of the Dickens Club will be held at the Breakfast Room of the Grand Pacific Hotel on the evening of Thursday, October 4, at 8 o'clock. Officers for the coming year will be elected. Members are requested to come prepared to make suggestions as to the future conduct of the Club, and also to bring with them prospective future members. *Nicholas Nickleby* is the book to be taken up for discussion."

For the next meetings we moved to the Fine Arts Building. “The next meeting of the Dicken’s (sic) Club of Chicago, will be held in Room 812 FINE ARTS BUILDING, MICHIGAN, AVENUE, Chicago, Thursday, November 1, 1906. Meeting to be opened at 8 P.M. instead of 8:30 as previously. A large attendance is most earnestly requested. Notice change in location. In our new quarters there will always be at the disposition of the Club a Grand Piano, which will serve to render a greater diversity in our Programmes than we have heretofore enjoyed. It is the earnest request of the Board of Managers that each and every member be present, and bring with him or her some person who is interested in our work. This means YOU. Lets us band ourselves together and strive to make this the very best season the Club has ever enjoyed. Let us have a full attendance.”

The next meeting was held on Thursday, November 15, at the same time with a repeat of the above quote.

The April 1924 Dickensian noted, “The Branch is very proud of its achievement (i.e., collaboration in a *Cricket on the Hearth* opera). February 7<sup>th</sup>, Dickens’s Birthday was celebrated with a dinner at the Auditorium. Speakers were Dr. Preston Bradley, Judge Ninian Welch, Mrs. Archibald Freer, etc., with music by a dramatic soprano.”

The 1929 Dickensian noted, “The memory of the New York Conference will remain forever in the minds of those who participated in the interesting events of these three red-letter-days.” Among the delegates was Mrs. O. M. Barr, representing Chicago.

In April 1932 the Dickens Corner was dedicated in St. Stephens Episcopal Church, now a Korean Church, at 3533 N. Albany. Chicago Dickens Fellowship members, present for the dedication, were Florence C. Walters, Margaret Gorham and Hugh Miller. As of 1994, all records from the former Episcopal St. Stephens Church are available for perusal at the Episcopal Headquarters at 65 E. Huron.

The May 12, 1932 record of happenings, signed by C. L. Hagins, Rec. Secy., noted, “As requested by our President, I paid a visit to the Mary Thompson Hospital to look up the Tiny Tim bed. The Lady Supt. explained that ... the small boy who occupied the Tiny Tim bed for four months has gone home a healthy lad again and there are no other child patients to occupy it. The space allotted to the Tiny Tim bed is now in use by women patients...” As of 1994, The Mary Thompson Hospital has been renamed the Woman’s Hospital and is located near Ashland and Madison. It had previously been located at Elm and Dearborn. No bed is now designated as the Tiny Tim bed.

The 1935 Dickensian notes, “One of the most popular attractions at the Chicago World’s Fair this year was the Merrie (sic) England Village which contained a reproduction of ...the Old Curiosity Shop. ...The Chicago Branch had their photographs taken in front of the Old Curiosity Shop...Following this, dinner was had in the Red Lion Inn, at which time rather ambitious plans were laid for the coming season of Fellowship activity.”

The 1969 Dickensian notes, “On 7 February last Mrs. Damaris W. Bradford, Hon. Secretary of the Chicago Branch, attended the opening and dedication of a new type of school in the Lawndale district of Chicago...She writes that this school, named The Charles Dickens School, is one of four such to be opened in Lawndale. It caters for children of nursery and primary school age from both the Spanish-speaking and Negro communities of the area. A special feature of these schools is their concern to involve the parents (who are required to attend one morning or afternoon a week) in the early stages of their children’s education. It is very pleasing and appropriate that Dickens’s name should be associated with this splendid enterprise.” The present Chicago School System lists a school as the Dickens Child Parent Center. It is located at 740 S. Campbell Ave.

The 1981 Dickensian notes, “On 8 February 1981 the British actor, George Harland, made his debut in the American Midwest by entertaining some 55 Chicago Dickensians. Mr. Harland gave a one and a half hour recital which consisted of a reading of *A Christmas Carol* and The Pork Pie from *The Uncommercial Traveller*. The event took place at the Orrington Hotel, Evanston, near Chicago and the programme proved such a success that Mr. Harland has promised to return later this year.”